



Colorado Media Project: Key Insights and Recommendations

From
“Save the Post”
to “Evolve
Local News”

In the spring of 2018, Coloradans began grappling in earnest with an accelerating but under-the-radar crisis: the significant diminishment of local news coverage, and its negative impact on the underpinnings of a healthy, civil society. Across the state, in public forums and private discussions, community members reflected on all that we have lost over the past decade. About 500 print journalists covered Denver and the state for its two daily papers in 2009, before the [demise of the Rocky Mountain News](#)¹ and the [hollowing of the Denver Post](#).² Today, the Post newsroom is down to fewer than 70. Throughout the state, other community papers have faced a similar decline, and many areas have become “[local news deserts](#)”.³



John Ferrugia returns to Las Animas County to talk with voters of all stripes two years after the Trump election. Photo courtesy of Rocky Mountain PBS.

From the start, the Project was designed to be independent and impartial – undertaken not on behalf of any particular institution, news outlet, or group of investors, but on behalf of the community, and driven by the news and information needs of average Coloradans. It also aimed to support and augment existing efforts – building on the assets of Colorado's existing news ecosystem, and promoting cooperation instead of competition.

In just four months, the Project has produced thought-provoking [research](#) and [insights](#), including:

- [A comprehensive scan of local news trends, innovations, and insights](#) gleaned from research, case studies, and stories across the U.S. and worldwide;¹¹
- [A survey of more than 2,000 Colorado residents](#) – detailing their news consumption patterns, platform and topic preferences, and willingness to pay for local news;
- [A benchmark study of independent, non-traditional news outlets in Colorado](#) – to learn who's out there producing high-quality, digital and public-service journalism, and how they're doing it;
- [In-depth interviews with dozens of Colorado media professionals](#) – drawing on their aggregate 500+ years of journalism experience;
- [Design thinking workshops, digital prototypes and market test results for four digital-first news apps](#) – aimed at connecting more Coloradans to local news in ways that address their needs;
- [An in-depth analysis of two potential business models](#) for commercially viable, statewide news platforms serving the public interest;
- And a series of public events to expose Colorado residents to national thought leaders in the field – including [Seth Geiger of SmithGeiger](#), [Molly de Aguiar of the News Integrity Initiative](#), and [Jason Alcorn of NewsMatch](#) and the [Democracy Fund](#).¹²

To see detailed data and analysis for each of these components of the Colorado Media Project, click on the links above (also listed at end of this paper), or visit www.coloradomediaproject.com. In this report, we'll attempt to make sense of it all – briefly describing overarching trends and insights, and providing our thoughts for charting a course forward, to help strengthen Coloradans' interest, trust, and investment in local news and information.





What We Learned

KEY INSIGHTS ON COLORADO NEWS AUDIENCES, OUTLETS, INNOVATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the “Attention Economy,” Local News Audiences are Increasingly Fragmented

The ways in which people get their news has shifted dramatically in the past decade. Especially with younger audiences, digital, mobile, and social are king. Local outlets are competing with national news, on-demand services, aggregators entertainment, and each other, for audience attention.

- 92% of Coloradans use a computer, mobile, or tablet device to consume news at least once per day, and 32% use their mobile device several times a day to consume news.¹³
- The majority of Coloradans are consuming news in short formats: Nearly 60% read only headlines or short summaries, while 34% prefer full-length articles or programs. Just 5% report regularly digging into long-form journalism.¹⁴
- Nationwide, American adults spend an average of 5.9 hours a day with digital media. 3.3 of those hours are spent on mobile devices, which is responsible for virtually all of the overall growth in digital media consumption since 2008. These patterns are even more pronounced among younger audiences.¹⁵
- In 2017 audience shrunk for nearly every major sector of the U.S. news media. The only exception was radio (which doesn't break out stats for news vs. music listening).¹⁶
- Social media starts the news cycle, and social networks and mobile apps are the fastest-growing pathway to news.¹⁷



KEY ANNUAL AUDIENCE TRENDS, 2017 vs. 2016

Newspapers	11%	daily circulation
Cable TV	12%	evening news combined average audience
Network TV	7%	evening news combined average audience
	10%	morning news combined average audience
Local TV	15%	morning news combined average audience
	7%	late night/ early evening combined average audience
Digital-native News	5%	average monthly unique visitors

Sources: Pew Research Center analysis of Alliance for Audited Media data; comScore TV Essentials®, 2016 and 2017, U.S.; comScore StationView Essentials®, 2016 and 2017, U.S.; comScore Media Metrix Multi-platform, unique visitors, October-December 2016 and 2017.

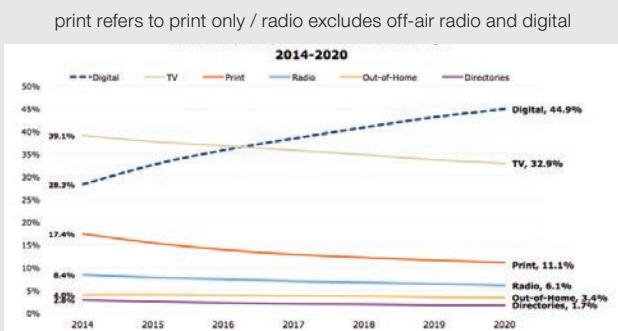


Local Commercial Outlets are Competing with Facebook and Google for Ad Revenue – and They're Losing

The “digital duopoly” of Facebook and Google accounted for nearly 59% of the U.S.’s \$90.4 billion digital ad market in 2017. No other competitor even cracked 5% market share.¹⁸ Little of this digital ad revenue benefits news-gathering entities.

- Nationally, advertising revenue for newspapers has plummeted since the early 2000s, despite slight growth in revenue from circulation.¹⁹
- 2017 was the first year digital ad spending finally beat television, with 13% growth projected next year for digital, compared to 2.5% growth for TV.²⁰

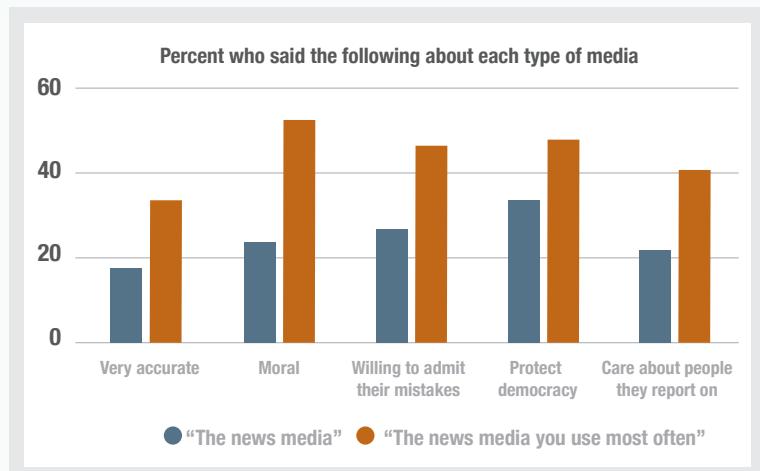
U.S. MEDIA AD SPENDING SHARE, BY MEDIUM, 2014-2020



Data source: eMarketer; Chart source: MarketingCharts.com

Trust in Local News and Public Media is Strong, Despite Polarization Nationally

- The vast majority of Americans have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in their local newspaper (73%) and television (76%) news sources.²¹
- PBS ranks third (86%) among the most-trusted national TV news brands – just 4% behind the most-trusted BBC, Great Britain’s public television network. Fox News is the second-most trusted by Americans, spotlighting the politicized national media landscape.²²
- Trust in national mass media reached an all-time low (32%) just prior to the 2016 election.²³ By 2018, more than half of Americans have at least “a fair amount” of trust in national TV news (55%) and national newspapers (47%). However, trust levels in national media vary significantly between Democrats (86%), Independents (38%) and Republicans (23%).²⁴
- People have more trust in “my media” than in “the media” in general – consistently ranking “the news media I use most often” as more accurate, moral, caring, willing to make mistakes, and concerned with protecting democracy.²⁵
- In early 2019, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy is set to release recommendations from its national effort to probe connections between trust, misinformation, and the highly polarized environment in which people now consume news.²⁶ One of the themes the Commission is pursuing is “reinvention” – bolstering successful local news organizations to “crowd out bad information with good”, noting that “a citizen with access to high quality news reporting from trusted sources is less likely to be manipulated.”²⁷



Source: Media Insight Project, American Press Institute and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2017.



Education reporter Erica Meltzer (Chalkbeat Colorado) in the field.
Photo credit: Kevin J. Beaty, Denverite.

There is a Large, Underserved Market that Cares About Local News – Delivered via Mobile

The trends noted above prompted the Colorado Media Project to investigate potential target markets and viable commercial business models for a sustainable, digital, Colorado news source for public-interest journalism.

- A Colorado Media Project survey of 2,000+ Coloradans discovered an addressable market of ~2.4 million residents who are interested in state, local, and neighborhood news, and who read more than headlines.²⁸

- Of those 2.4 million, more than 1 million are willing to pay for local news.
- Members of this 1 million-person target market most often read news on a mobile device several times per day (41%). They are 83% more likely than average Coloradans to consume a local digital news outlet.
- Their top motivation for consuming news is to learn about things that impact their life (74%); they are less interested in abstract topics.
- Local government and political news was highest on the list of content types these potential readers are seeking (47%), and were the topics they would be most willing to pay for (35%).
- Older Coloradans are significantly more likely to pay for news than are readers in the 18-44 age range.
- Users want a mobile-first design that is entertaining, informative, and builds social capital. Features such as location tagging, swiping through stories, and timely headlines delivered via mobile notifications can inspire users to dive deeper into news stories or expand their topics of interest.²⁹

Diversified Revenue Models That Blend Subscriptions or Memberships with Advertising or Sponsorships are Vital

The Project identified two potential business models – “help you understand” and “community news” – as commercially viable, sustained primarily through advertising and subscriptions.³⁰ While these business models focused on providing news analysis, community-generated information, and content curation, Project leaders determined that they did not address the significant gap in newsgathering capacity that currently defines the Colorado news landscape. Meanwhile, key data from the survey of 2,000+ Coloradans pointed to the potential of building community memberships and business sponsorships as a path toward sustainability.

- The target market of Coloradans who are interested in and would pay for local news identified an ad-free platform (42%) as the attribute most likely to increase their consumption of city or state news.
- “Feeling good about contributing to an organization” is the second most important factor in the target market’s willingness to pay for content from a local outlet.
- Tapping into civic interest for memberships, sponsorships, or underwriting of local news holds promise. Business models that rely too heavily on digital advertising revenue will continue to be challenged by the “digital duopoly” and may risk losing local audiences.
- Research is plentiful and continuously evolving on which business models are working best for local news. NiemanLab³¹, the Local News Lab³², and The American Press Institute³³ are rich resources that track the evolution of local news. The Reuters Institute and University of Oxford’s 2018 Report on the Digital Transformation of Local News³⁴ also provides insights and guidance.

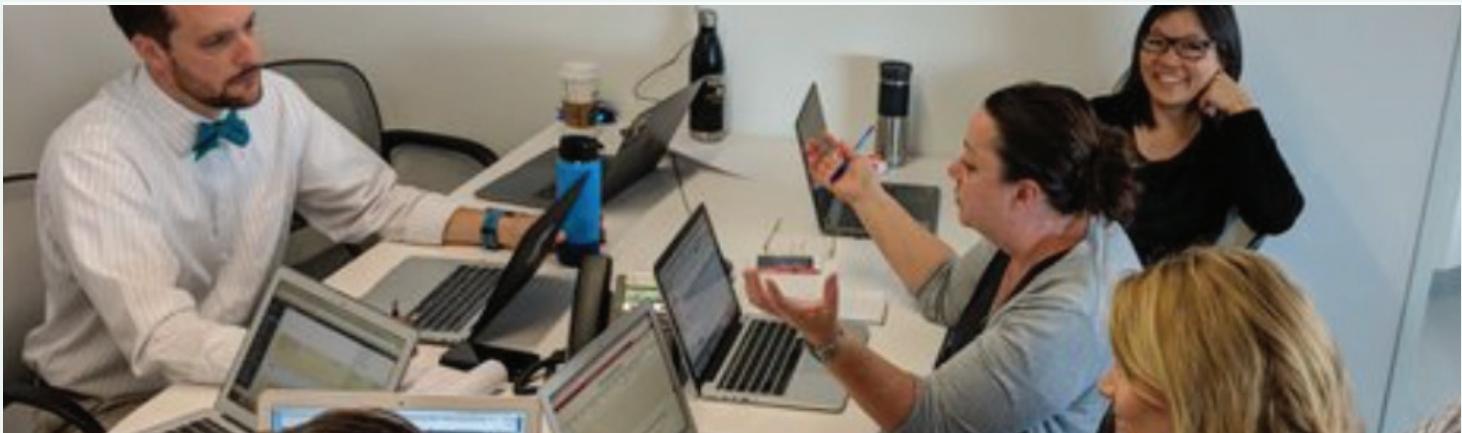


Photo courtesy of The Colorado Sun, a new digital-only news source launched in September 2018.

Colorado's Digital-Native News Ecosystem is Growing and Dynamic – but Fragile

Across Colorado, former newspaper journalists have launched several promising digital news outlets. Because philanthropic dollars are targeted here already, the Project was keenly interested in the current state of this sector of the news industry and new models being developed here for supporting public-interest journalism. We conducted qualitative interviews with dozens of local journalists and reporters, and also partnered with the Institute for Nonprofit News to conduct a survey of 14 independent news outlets in Colorado to learn more about their mission, coverage topics, audience and staff size, business models, and more.

- Most of Colorado's digital-native outlets are young, are under-invested in their business operations, and lack capacity for at-scale revenue generation, audience targeting, and community engagement. Yet with more start-up support, more focus on revenue generation, and more capacity to connect with local audiences, these outlets can find models to sustain their good work and their business. Detailed findings from the 2018 Colorado Digital and Nonprofit Media Landscape benchmark report are online at www.coloradomediaproject.com.³⁵
- Of the 39% of Coloradans who pay for news, only 8% of those are paying for a digital outlet – leaving much room for growth in this sector.³⁶
- In the four months the Colorado Media Project was at work: one local digital outlet shut down (Confluence Denver); one new digital outlet launched with a 10-journalist team and enthusiastic community support (The Colorado Sun); one digital outlet was contemplating its future as its sole staffer accepted a new job; and another digital outlet (Denverite) added a specialty beat reporter – underwritten by a collection of nonprofit organizations concerned about housing and hunger.
- The membership model developed by public media – cultivation of a strong brand based in public-service journalism, diverse revenue streams, and connection with local community – holds great promise for these smaller outlets. Powered by this model, Colorado Public Radio and Rocky Mountain PBS have recently expanded their statewide reach, newsgathering, and investigative capacity.
- Many digital news outlets are already sharing content, have dabbled with collaborative newsgathering and production, and are eager to think collectively about Colorado's news ecosystem.³⁷



Nationwide, an Ecosystem Approach is Helping to Strengthen Local Public-Service Journalism

The nonprofit news sector is growing nationwide, and increasingly, membership-driven/ad-free commercial outlets (Denverite and The Colorado Sun are local examples) are virtually indistinguishable from nonprofits. Increasing collaboration and coordination among these outlets and with traditional media can strengthen both the entities themselves, and also their ability to impact the communities and issues they cover.

- Taking a more strategic, ecosystem approach to strengthening local news is gaining steam nationwide. Examples include [The Center for Cooperative Media](#) at Montclair State University in New Jersey, the [North Carolina Local News Lab](#), and a recently announced expansion of the [Knight-Lenfest Newsroom Initiative](#) that may include non-legacy newsrooms.³⁸
- Local news collaboratives can play a role in galvanizing local investment in local news, and can help local media outlets do things they know are critical to their survival (business development, innovation, collaboration), but on which they may currently devote little time, energy, and focus.
- National media funders and technical partners are increasingly interested in supporting local news as the sector experiences rapid change. Local news outlets and local funders can come together to better leverage national-local funding opportunities such as NewsMatch, and capacity-building opportunities such as the Center for Investigative Reporting's Reveal Labs, Solutions Journalism training, and efforts to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion in newsrooms.
- Shared space can play a role in strengthening the newsroom culture and collaboration opportunities for local news. Rocky Mountain PBS is currently offering smaller local outlets the chance to co-locate in its new \$30 million Buell Public Media Center, set to open in 2020. With the Associated Press committed as an anchor partner, the Community Media Center could provide an incubation space for start-up news outlets, including access to amenities for community events, video equipment, and technical expertise.



Rocky Mountain PBS journalists Lori Jane Gliha and Paul Cywilko interview a Las Animas rancher for an Insight with John Ferrugia special called "Trumped: The Rural Rebellion." Photo courtesy of Rocky Mountain PBS



What's Next:

BUILDING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND INVESTMENT IN COLORADO'S LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

While the Colorado Media Project gathered a great deal of useful information, perhaps its most salient conclusion is that our community is at a crossroads:

- The old ways of gathering, disseminating, and paying for local news have changed forever.
- The new path to sustainability for local news outlets requires at least three major shifts – building a diversity of revenue streams (membership, subscriptions, sponsorship, advertising, philanthropy, major gifts, events, services, etc.), evolving technology to meet users where they are, and developing authentic public engagement strategies that welcome people into the newsgathering process and build community and trust.
- Colorado's current local news ecosystem is starved of resources and struggling to evolve in ways that will sustain the news and information needs of our community.
- For at least the next three to five years, increases in philanthropic and public membership or subscription support will be essential components to promote innovation and an evolution of the local news landscape.

How can we move toward a thriving news and information ecosystem for Colorado that is built upon local community investment, engagement, and trust?

We propose that two new, independent but related resources – a **Colorado News Lab** and an affiliated **Colorado News Fund** – could help address the current crisis by promoting:

- **Sustainability.** Many of Colorado's news outlets under-invest in the business side of their operations, and lack sufficiently diverse revenue streams. A Colorado News Lab could help local outlets develop their capacity for business leadership, build and grow revenue, and research new business models and opportunities. A related but separately governed Colorado News Fund could become a galvanizing, statewide force for increasing the number of foundations and individuals who invest in local news, particularly at this pivotal time.
- **Innovation.** To survive in the evolving world of digital news, organizations must try, test, and deploy new approaches to gathering, producing, and distributing information – particularly to attract and retain the next generation of civic participants. Most journalists never envisioned this being part of their work, but it must be going forward. By creating connections to and contracting with local and national experts, a Colorado News Lab could support R&D into new digital tools, technology, and platforms. It could also provide training and specialized coaching to help newsrooms adopt new practices that support deeper public engagement, especially with underserved communities.
- **Collaboration.** A Colorado News Lab could help local outlets map coverage and identify gaps; facilitate projects, partnerships, and other approaches to meet Colorado's news needs; and explore shared services and shared space. A Colorado News Fund could provide a vehicle for collaborative investments from multiple sources; without such a vehicle, Colorado stands to lose out on significant resources from national foundations, technical partners, and other local news labs that are tackling similar issues.
- **Coverage.** Despite the growth of digital media outlets in Colorado, there are several hundred fewer journalists covering local news today than 15 years ago, and significant news deserts exist, both in terms of issue areas and geographies. A Colorado News Fund could provide financial support to help new and existing local news outlets increase coverage of underserved issues and areas, work together to provide multi-faceted coverage or investigations, and ensure that news reaches and engages audiences.



Denverite reporter Esteban L. Hernandez (right) covers a public forum for Colorado Attorney General candidates. Credit: Kevin J. Beatty, Denverite



Susan Greene, editor of *The Colorado Independent*, displays an award from the Society of Professional Journalists.

It is important to note that our recommendation is to provide **additive infrastructure** to support Colorado's local news ecosystem during a critical period of transition and development. In other words, it is important that philanthropic funders, investors, and individuals continue to support local outlets' newsgathering capacity, rather than simply shifting their giving from those organizations to any new effort that is targeting long-term sustainability of the sector.

Launching a Colorado News Lab and Fund would require a significant investment from the local community – we would recommend a **three-year commitment of capital totaling at least \$4 million to \$7+ million** to provide sufficient investment in building the capacity of Colorado's local news ecosystem. We envision the lab would be led by a lean staff and a committed group of advisors who are focused on drawing in new resources, opportunities, training, best practices, and innovations from across the nation and beyond – and partnering local media outlets would be the primary beneficiary of these resources. But even before raising funds, securing commitments from three categories of partners of the lab would be vital to the effort's success:

- **Colorado media.** A wide array of news entities and journalists have been involved in the Colorado Media Project over the past few months. Moving forward, we encourage these entities and others to consider what a Colorado Media Lab could bring to them, and what they could bring to the lab. The lab could serve both for- and non-profit Colorado outlets, and could bring together national outlets wishing to partner with local media enterprises. Media organizations involved in the lab would not be limited to digital-native outlets; the news lab's resources would also be available to newspapers and other traditional news outlets interested in developing new ways of engaging their audiences, enhancing and diversifying their revenue streams, and developing new digital tools. Ethnic media and outlets serving diverse Colorado populations and publishing in other languages would also be actively sought out and encouraged to partner with the lab.
- **University/academic/business.** The University of Denver has been an integral player in this first phase of the Colorado Media Project. Other Colorado higher education institutions would be encouraged to become actively involved as well. Schools of business, technology, journalism, media, communications, and film could provide relevant and helpful partnership. Non-traditional learning organizations that provide training for community members seeking to tell their own stories, such as the Open Media Foundation and the House of Pod, would also be encouraged to partner with the lab. There are potentially key roles here as well for interested entrepreneurs and businesspeople, as well as people from the technology sector.



- **National media consortia and other groups.** The [Institute for Nonprofit News \(INN\)](#) has been an important partner in the Colorado Media Project, and other groups serving media organizations, such as the [Local Independent Online News Publishers \(LION\)](#) would be encouraged to become actively involved as well. The [News Revenue Hub](#), the [Center for Investigative Reporting](#), the [Poynter Institute](#), the [Lenfest Institute](#), the [News Integrity Initiative](#), [Solutions Journalism](#), [Free Press/News Voices](#), [Hearken](#), [GroundSource](#), and other national groups are potential partners capable of bringing new resources, training, and collaborative opportunities to Colorado through the lab. The Democracy Fund's [Local News Lab](#)³⁹, the [New Jersey News Commons](#)⁴⁰ and the [North Carolina News Lab](#)⁴¹ can provide lessons and models for collaboration and community investment, and could serve as peers for an ongoing learning network.

Through the end of 2018, the Colorado Media Project and the Gates Family Foundation will be exploring interest in a Colorado News Lab and Fund – and actively soliciting input from potential partners in the above spheres, to evolve and strengthen the concept we've outlined here – as well as local and national philanthropic partners and investors.

The current crisis in Colorado's media landscape is ongoing, but it presents some exciting opportunities for news audiences, journalists, entrepreneurs, innovators, and people interested in supporting them in thoughtful and productive ways. We look forward to continuing this work, and invite you to join us in building a stronger, more sustainable local news ecosystem for Colorado.



COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Tom Gougeon, President, Gates Family Foundation

JB Holston, Dean, Daniel Felix Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science, University of Denver

John Huggins, Chairman and President, Notable Systems

Roxane White, Founder and CEO, Strategy with Rox

COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT TEAM

Will Alverson, Cultivo Media

Chelsea Church, BCG

Melissa Davis, Gates Family Foundation

Andrew Elliman, Volunteer

Meredith Gee, Cultivo Media

Allison Grant, BCG

Alan Gottlieb, Write. Edit. Think. LLC

Hannah Lippe, Fidelity Labs

Scott Romano, Cultivo Media

Scott Stemberger, BCG

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Gates Family Foundation

JB Holston

Steven and Kathryn Heckman

Kelley Knox Family Foundation

Mryhen Media and Tryg Myhren

Pacific Coast Business Times and Henry Dubroff and
John Huggins

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Colorado Public Radio

Cultivo Media

The Colorado Sun

Democracy Fund

Denverite

The Denver Post

Empowering Colorado

Fresh Water News

Institute for Nonprofit News

Lenfest Institute

Longmont Observer

The Mountain Independent

NewsMatch

News Integrity Initiative,

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Rocky Mountain PBS

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Strategy with Rox

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Write. Edit. Think.

COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT PARTNERS

Project X-ITE is Denver University's cross-discipline innovation hub for technology and entrepreneurship.

DU experts involved in the Colorado Media Project include: Lynn Schofield Clark, Chair of Media, Film and Journalism; DU Trustee Greg Moore, former Editor in Chief of the Denver Post; and former DU trustee Tryg Myhre, a long-time multi-media executive in newspapers, cable, television and other media.

The **Boston Consulting Group**, a global management consulting firm, offered pro bono experts from its Denver office and media practice to synthesize media trends and insights, conduct original market research, and produce viable business plans for the Colorado Media Project.

Denver University students from **Cultivo Media**, a start-up design and development consultancy, conducted in-depth audience interviews with Coloradans from across the state, from all walks of life, and leading the project's rapid prototyping process.

Since 1946, the **Gates Family Foundation** has been a community resource for advancing long-term quality of life in Colorado. The Foundation has supported public and independent media for decades, especially as vital issues such as public education, rural issues, and natural resources have faced declining media coverage from traditional outlets.



Sources:

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